

Sustaining Coalition through Adaptive Electoral Alliance: Kōmeitō's local adjustment mechanism in electoral cooperation with Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)

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This paper attempts to unravel how Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Kōmeitō were able to sustain their coalition partnership over the past two decades despite policy and ideological incompatibilities. This paper argues that it is the mechanism of flexible adaptation installed at local levels that has enabled the Kōmeitō to avoid over-supporting the LDP counterpart and deter risks of cooperating with the senior partner in times of political crises. From the system of candidate recommendations to allocation of votes, the two parties operate under such a system that allows individuated incorporation of Kōmeitō votes on the one hand, and to delicately adjust the outflow of electoral resources through candidate-based support mechanism, on the other.

Keywords: *Kōmeitō, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), electoral alliance, adaptive cooperation*

THE PUZZLE OF LDP-KŌMEITŌ ALLIANCE

Panned as the “number-crunching” “life-prolonging treatment” of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the initiation of the party alliance between the LDP and the Kōmeitō in 1999 was, to say the least, contested. The antagonistic relationship between the two parties reached its peak in the mid-1990s—only a few years before they became what proved to be the most successful inter-party partnership Japan has ever seen. In 1994, the Kōmeitō Diet members joined the formation of New Frontier Party (NFP, *shinshintou*), an initiative driven by a former LDP representative Ozawa Ichiro, who, along with other reform-minded conservative politicians, upheld the banner of ‘alternative axis’ to the LDP. Threatened by the advancement of NFP in the 1995 Upper House election, in which the newly established party earned forty seats against LDP’s forty-six, the LDP’s attacks on the NFP, as well as on the Kōmeitō’s support base, Sōka Gakkai, accelerated. Calling the NFP the “Gakkai party,” the LDP’s castigation against the Kōmeitō developed alongside with the attacks on Sōka Gakkai, whom they characterized as ‘undemocratic and authoritarian’ religious organization that violates the principle of the separation of politics and religion.¹ The (former) Kōmeitō, as well as Sōka Gakkai, retaliated against these claims by claiming that the Constitution does not forbid the involvement of religious organization with political activities, and that the Sōka Gakkai does not affect policy proposition or personnel matters of the NFP in any way.²

¹ LDP’s attacks on the Kōmeitō and Sōka Gakkai appeared most frequently on the party’s weekly newspaper *Jiyū Shinpō*, which ran a weekly column entitled *NFP-Sōka Gakkai Watching* between January 1996 and October 1997. Also, Shirakawa Katsuhiko, LDP representative, published a book criticizing the party’s decision to form a coalition alliance with the Kōmeitō, in which he listed the name of LDP members who also criticized the LDP-Kōmeitō-Liberal Party initiative as ‘unconstitutional’ (Shirakawa 2000).

² *Kōmei Shimbun*, 5 August 1995

It was only natural, considering the extent of negative campaigns against one another throughout the mid-1990s, that the two parties' abrupt transformation from 'sworn enemies' to 'coalition partners' following the 1998 Upper House election ignited criticism against 'illicit collusion' which failed to present shared policy goals. A few studies have demonstrated that the Kōmeitō's policy preferences were closer to the DPJ, rather than the LDP (Kabashima and Yamamoto 2004, Kato and Laver 2003).³ In fact, when the NFP disintegrated after a series of intra-party struggles and the old Kōmeitō members reorganized as the New Kōmeitō, it was the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), not the LDP, with whom they sought for the possibility of political and electoral alliance, redefining itself as a 'member of opposition alliance.'⁴ Furthermore, the degree of ideological and policy incompatibilities between the LDP and the Kōmeitō remained significant even as coalition partners. Kōmeitō Diet members were characterized as 'centrist-liberal' in foreign, security, and social policy axis, while 'traditional-centrist' in economic policies. The LDP members, on the other hand, are 'conservative' in the former category and 'traditional' in the latter. In other words, the members of the two parties may agree on economic policies, while they stand opposite to one another in foreign, security, and social policy arenas. What is striking is the policy position of the members of the DPJ; in all policy arenas, their policy positions (centrist-liberal in foreign, security, and social policies and centrist-reformist in economic policies) are significantly closer to that of Kōmeitō's (Taniguchi et al. 2010). The LDP-Kōmeitō alliance, in other words, was not facilitated by the compatibility of policy preferences, as classic literatures on coalition formation suggest (Axelrod 1970, Leiserson 1966, Liff and Maeda 2018).

Such mismatches of policy preferences between the LDP and the Kōmeitō have invited speculations regarding the true objective behind this peculiar two-party alliance—electoral cooperation. The most conventional view on why the LDP-Kōmeitō alliance sustained despite policy incompatibility focuses on the 'electoral' aspect of cooperation, rather than the number-games in the Diet (Yakushiji 2016, Shimada 2007, Nakano 2016). The existing analyses of the two-party relations have focused on the 'efficacy' of electoral cooperation that takes place during national—particularly the lower house— elections, based on which the LDP's acquiring of the largest share of lower house seats has been made possible after 2000. Some studies suggest that, without the electoral cooperation with the Kōmeitō and Sōka Gakkai, the LDP would have single-handedly lost general elections to the largest opposition party as early as 2003 (Kawato 2004, 270-274: 270-274, Kabashima 2014: 371-387, Liff and Maeda 2018).

While these studies succeed in highlighting the critical importance of the Kōmeitō votes in the maintaining of LDP-Kōmeitō coalition alliance and thus the coalition government, such static perspective on the two-party relations leaves room for critical questions. For one thing, these literatures simply assume Kōmeitō/Sōka Gakkai as monolithic social entity, who has apparently come to rely on 'policy appeals' to mobilize votes rather than its social identity (Ehrhardt 2009). Another critical gap in these understanding of LDP-Kōmeitō alliance can be found in empirical facts: They overlook the divergent levels of 'cooperation'

³ Kato and Laver's analysis argued that the LDP's approach to the Kōmeitō in the late 1990s can be explained by the two parties' similar policy positions on economic policies, yet they also implied that the stability of the coalition government would be impaired if and when the policy emphasis shifts to other policy axis, for which the two parties do not share the same preferences—such as external policy and the issues of national identity.

⁴ *Asahi Shimbun*, 6 March 1999.

that takes place during national elections. In other words, it fails to explain why the electoral cooperation between the LDP and Kōmeitō is characterized by unequal distribution of electoral resources, rather than by a commensurate vote allocation process. Such limitation stems from the common understanding toward the high level of coherence among Sōka Gakkai members, who are generally discussed synonymously with Kōmeitō supporters and characterized by highly-centralized hierarchical organizational structure (Nishijima 1968, Murakami 1969, Hori 1999).

This paper is an attempt to unravel how the two parties with dissimilar policy preferences have managed to overcome them in the construction of one of the most successful electoral alliances. I will argue that it was through the development of an ‘adaptive cooperation mechanism’ established between the LDP and the Kōmeitō at the local level—prefectural and district—that has enabled these two ‘strange bedfellows’ to implement effective electoral cooperation after the 2000s. Unlike the LDP who evaluates Kōmeitō candidates collectively at the central level, Kōmeitō adopted ‘candidate-based’ evaluation system vis-à-vis the LDP candidates, which operates virtually at the prefectural level. The significant role of Kōmeitō’s prefectural-level decision-making in terms of vote allocation becomes evident not only in issuing of recommendations, but particularly in adjusting the timing of the commencement of electoral cooperation. Furthermore, as it can be inferred from the Kōmeitō’s emphasis on the ‘quality of candidate (*kōhōsha no shitsu*)’ in engaging in electoral cooperation, the degree of vote mobilization is bargained between individual LDP candidates and Kōmeitō’s respective local organization, rather than between parties’ central leaderships.

Such locally-ordained cooperation mechanisms function as risk-aversion apparatus for the Kōmeitō, for not only do they allow the party’s central leadership to accommodate diverse local demands of its supporters, but they also mitigate the risk of over-supporting the LDP counterpart by decentralizing the decision-making process and adjusting the outflow of its electoral resources. Essentially, this marginal autonomy granted to Kōmeitō’s decision-making bodies at prefectural and district levels becomes the key organ for adaptive—therefore flexible—executions of electoral cooperation between the two parties, through which the two coalition partners with distinct social and political foundations have managed successful alliance partnership over the past two decades.

LOGIC OF ELECTORAL COOPERATION

Conventional view on the efficacy of LDP-Kōmeitō electoral alliance draws upon the new electoral environments established after the 1994 reform (Shimada 2007: 162-164, Nakano 2016: 2-8). Generally, the reason for the initiation as well as the duration of this unlikely partnership is explained by the electoral regime—specifically, the new electoral system adopted in 1994. Japan adopted a new electoral rule in 1994 for the Lower House election, which combined single-member district system (SMD, 300 seats, currently 289) and proportional representation (PR, currently 176), replacing the SNTV system. The electoral reform brought two major changes to the nature of electoral competition in Japan. First, since the new electoral system that centers on SMD system was expected to reduce the effective number of parties and induce two-party system and party-based competitions (Duverger 1964, Cox 1997, Cain 1987, Carey and Shugart 1995). The LDP’s challenge came from reactionary realignment of the opposition forces among the conservatives. Specifically, the rise of the New Frontier Party (NFP) and then Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) as a viable

opposition party since the mid-1990s seemed to indicate the rise of ‘two-party competition’ under the new electoral system. From Kōmeitō’s perspective, on the other hand, the major challenge that derived from the new electoral rule was the high election threshold for winning in districts. As a minor party, Kōmeitō proved unable to mobilize enough votes to elect its own candidate, even in those districts where Kōmeitō’s support base is most concentrated—in the urban regions.⁵

The second critical alteration in the electoral competition under the new rule was the urbanization of the electoral competition. District reapportionment as a part of electoral reform significantly reduced the vote-seat disparity, redressing the rural-biased district malapportionment and increased the value of urban votes (McElwain 2012). Under the 1955 system, the LDP was essentially a ‘rural party’ established upon clientalist relationship between individual politicians, who poured subsidies and public projects to economically dependent rural areas and interest groups who, in return, gathered under the politicians’ organizational machine (Scheiner 2006, Rosenbluth and Thies 2010). This rural-biased political system worked in favor for the LDP throughout the period of economic growth, yet the decline of agricultural industry, population outflow from the rural areas and shrinking *kōenkai* activities demolished the fortification upon which the LDP’s predominance had stood (Sugawara 2004). Simply put, the LDP came to face the necessity of expanding its organizational focus in urban districts, as the electoral reform as well as the demographic changes enhanced the necessity of attracting urban voters.

Under this newly consolidating electoral environment, the LDP and Kōmeitō found it effective to engage in ‘vote-bartering.’ The mechanism of electoral cooperation is summarized into a simple phrase: ‘LDP for district, Kōmei for PR’ (*senkyokuha jimin, hireiha koumei*). The supporters of the two parties are encouraged to split their votes between SMD and PR tiers. Since the Kōmeitō is a small party and fields only a limited number of candidates in SMDs, the Kōmeitō supporters vote for the LDP candidate in their district, while the LDP candidates return the favor by asking their supporters to vote for the Kōmeitō in PR. Based on the Kōmeitō’s vote counts in PR, and taking the Kōmeitō supporters’ high level of coherence into account, some estimate that about 20,000 to 30,000 Kōmeitō votes are delivered to the LDP’s candidate in each district.⁶ To illustrate how critical Kōmeitō support could be for a candidate running in SMDs, let us take an example from the 2003 LH election. The average number of votes casted in each of 300 SMDs was about 204,000,⁷ which means that, if a candidate could earn about 100,000 votes, his/her election was almost certainly guaranteed. If we assume that the Kōmeitō could mobilize 20,000 votes in each district, this pool of organized votes make up for 20 per cent of the required number of votes for a candidate to become elected. Such leverage the Kōmeitō possesses would even enhance further in the districts where competitions are close, as well as in urban districts where votes are relatively harder to organize given the floating tendency of the urban voters (Tanaka and Martin, 2003).⁸

⁵ For example, Kōmeitō’s Yamaguchi Natsuro lost against LDP’s Hirasawa Katsuen in District Tokyo 17 in the 2000 Lower House election.

⁶ This calculation is based on Kōmeitō’s vote gains in PR during national elections, which usually range between seven to nine million votes. Divided by the number of single-member districts (300), some believe that the Kōmeitō is able to mobilize 20,000 to 30,000 votes per district.

⁷ The total number of casted votes was 61,196,418 nationwide (turnout rate 59.6%)

⁸ Tanaka and Martin defined the concept of ‘new independent voters’ as the group of ‘anti-partisan

Table 1. Number of Recommendations between LDP and Kōmeitō in general elections

	42 nd 2000	43 rd 2003	44 th 2005	45 th 2009	46 th 2012	47 th 2014
#LDP candidate	271	277	290	289	289	283
Recommendation from the Kōmeitō	161 (59.4%)	199 (71.8%)	239 (82.4%)	272 (94.1%)	196 (67.8%)	258 (91.2%)
#Kōmeitō candidate	18	10	9	8	9	10
Recommendation from the LDP	14	10	9	8	9	10

Source: Asahi Shimbun

While this approach to the mechanism of electoral cooperation between the LDP and the Kōmeitō explains the logic behind the cooperative relationship between the two parties, however, it fails to address the dynamics of the two-party electoral cooperation. In other words, it overlooks the fact that the electoral cooperation does not take place uniformly across districts. One indicator that illuminates the divergent degrees of electoral cooperation is the number of recommendations given to the LDP candidates from the Kōmeitō. Recommendation, or *suisen*, is an official declaration of support from the party's central leadership to the candidate of other parties, and especially in the single-member competitions, the recommendation itself is what comes closest to endorsement from parties other than its own. In other words, recommendation, like party labels, can become an important source of information among voters in making their voting decisions. As Table 1 indicates, the number of recommendations given from the Kōmeitō to the LDP candidates varies across general elections, indicating the divergent degrees of cooperation between the LDP and Kōmeitō in district/individual levels.

The existing studies that focus solely on the electoral regime in explaining the LDP-Kōmeitō cooperative mechanism overlook such differing degrees of 'cooperation' between the two parties across districts and elections. Such disregard seems to have derived not only from 'biased' perceptions toward the Kōmeitō/Sōka Gakkai as a coherent socio-political group, but also from the exclusive association of 'electoral alliance' with the electoral regime.

It was Duverger who first argued that it was the electoral regime that determines the nature of electoral alliances across political parties. While his mentioning of electoral alliance does not go much farther than claiming its 'local' and 'implicit' nature, he implies that the study of electoral alliance may be more difficult than those of parliamentary or governmental alliance; he claims that expressing support for another candidate as the candidate 'stands down' is, to borrow his words, 'more effective but more embarrassing' (Duverger 1964: 331). Put simply, the discreet nature of electoral alliance derives not only from the secretive nature of political parties' electoral strategies, but also from the possibility that such outright electoral arrangement formed across parties may question the 'ethics' of particular political alliance (White 2018).

While most studies on electoral alliance focus almost exclusively on the electoral regime

independents and ex-partisan independents,' who were overrepresented in the urban areas and had made up more than 50% of voting population in Japan by the mid-1990s.

in explaining party behaviors (Bawn 1999, Herrmann and Pappi 2008, Gschwend 2006, Roberts 1988), electoral regime is not the only institution that constrains the behaviors of individual political actors. Because inter-party cooperation is carried out within the framework of organizational interaction, individual actors are constrained by their own party's internal organizational structure as well as the set of rules it provides. In other words, the divergence of electoral alliances cannot be explained without shedding light on local-specific context and already-established set of institutions around which the actors operate their electoral strategies. Simply put, the interactions among parties and its members takes place not only at the central level but also at all different 'faces' of multi-level party organizations. While a cynic may argue that the LDP as well as Kōmeitō/Sōka Gakkai only cares about the party's survival, the Sōka Gakkai members' unwavering devotion to their beliefs and political identity as 'pacifist party for the mass' cannot go simply overlooked. Similarly, it is one thing to assume candidate's or political parties' incentives for vote maximization at the cost of overlooking policy or ideological incompatibilities, yet it is another to overlook how the supporters are incorporated into the system of electoral alliance that deem 'unnatural' and even 'compromising' to their policy preferences and beliefs.

There are largely two explanations given to how the LDP and the Kōmeitō have managed to overlook their policy/ideological distance in maintaining the coalition partnership. First, some claim that the LDP and Kōmeitō have never been too far apart, at least in terms of ideological inclinations of their supporters. While the Kōmeitō put forth its political identity as progressive or 'non-LDP' front throughout the Cold War period, the voting behaviors of the Kōmeitō supporters suggest mixed attitudes vis-à-vis conservative values. A study on the two general elections held in 1963 and 1967 analyzes the vote gains of eleven Kōmeitō candidates who ran as the party's first campaign for lower house seats in 1967 (Tanaka 2005: 83-84). The analysis shows that the Kōmeitō candidates' vote gains in the 1967 election are almost equal to the number of vote losses of the LDP and JSP candidates in those districts, based on which the author concludes that, before the 1967 general election, Kōmeitō votes were equally divided between LDP and JSP.⁹ Such 'double-identity' of Kōmeitō supporters seems to have rooted in the history of their migration from conservative rural regions to progressive urban cities during the period of high economic growth, which created a social group that is conservative by nature but grew progressive as they became incorporated into lower strata of social hierarchy (Shimada 2007: 133-135). In fact, one Sōka Gakkai member who was in his sixties identified himself as 'always been conservative.'¹⁰ Furthermore, Kōmeitō's double-sided attitude toward the LDP in the pre-coalition period is most exposed in local elections and governance. Not only did Kōmeitō cooperate with the LDP in local elections such as Kyoto gubernatorial election held in 1970 by supporting a joint candidate who ran against JCP-endorsed Ninagawa Torazō, in metropolitan cities such as Tokyo, Kōmeitō formed a ruling coalition with the LDP in the metropolitan assembly since the early stage (Sasaki 2011: 69-70). Based on these political developments, some contend that the Kōmeitō supporters shared similar political/ideological backgrounds with the LDP's traditional power base and had displayed a possibility for political cooperation long before the formation of coalition government.¹¹

⁹ He also adds that the Kōmeitō candidates in urban districts brought in new Kōmeitō voters who did not vote before 1967, which amounts to 5.3% of total vote gains by the Kōmeitō candidates.

¹⁰ Interview with a professor of Soka University, 17 January 2017

¹¹ Others point to the Kōmeitō-Tanaka Kakuei relations in explaining Kōmeitō's often-cooperative

Second perspective regarding the sustainability of the LDP-Kōmeitō alliance contends that the Kōmeitō has been successful in drawing out policy compromises from the LDP, particularly in such policy fields as social welfare, which have served as lubricant for cooperative operation of coalition government. As the LDP's neoliberalist drive accelerated after the 2000s, Kōmeitō took pride as the last stronghold of centrist values (or what they call *ningen shugi*), successfully implementing policy negotiations in such legislatures as child allowance, national pension system reform, introduction of reduced tax rate, and reconstruction assistance after the Great East Japan Earthquake (Hasunuma and Klein 2014, Kōmeitōshi hensan iinkai 2014: 247-258, 299-307). Furthermore, Kōmeitō has emphasized its role as a 'brake' on LDP's rightist agenda, particularly in the field of security policies (Sato and Yamaguchi 2016: 60-70). Analyzing the series of policy negotiations regarding the collective self-defense in 2014, Liff and Maeda (2018) demonstrate how the Kōmeitō was able to induce policy compromises from the LDP, despite asymmetric power balance within the Diet.

Yet assigning the sustainability of two-party government to the success of leadership-level policy negotiations as well as the 'conservative nature' of Kōmeitō supporters is an oversimplification of this complex coalition alliance, and essentially stands upon the false presumption that both LDP and Kōmeitō/Sōka Gakkai as coherent political groups.¹² It is another matter whether Kōmeitō supporters are in full support of policy positions proposed by the coalition government, and if so, why Kōmeitō adopts 'candidate-based evaluation system' instead of agreeing upon the holistic electoral support vis-à-vis LDP. In other words, it does not explain why the Kōmeitō implemented an adaptive cooperation mechanism in cooperating with the LDP, rather than top-down electoral mobilization, which functioned as a defensive apparatus to accommodate diverse demands without damaging its high coherence among party supporters. Such flexibility became essential not only because it was necessary to accommodate policy demands from the LDP, but more so because of the diversity of electoral demands that vary across districts and elections.

The rest of this paper argues that the two unlikely partners have managed to overcome policy/ideological incompatibilities at district levels primarily by institutionalizing candidate-centered cooperative mechanism at local levels, which minimizes the risk of inevitable political compromises embedded in the two parties' dissimilar ideological and policy preferences. As following sections discuss, such marginal autonomy given to the Kōmeitō's local support organizations as well as individual voters helps assuage the possible frictions that could arise within the Kōmeitō/Sōka Gakkai organizations during the course of electoral cooperation with LDP counterpart, who may or may not share Kōmeitō or its supporters' political interests. In other words, by developing internal mechanism centering on the principle of 'individual-based' evaluation system vis-à-vis the LDP candidates, Kōmeitō engages in carefully scaled mobilization of its electoral resources, rather than holistic and collective electoral support for its senior partner.

stance toward the LDP in the pre-alliance period (Nakano 2016: 35-36; Yakushiji 2016: 65-37).

¹² The discord between party leadership and Sōka Gakkai believers regarding security legislation and Okinawa base issues have drawn some attention in recent years. In 2016, three former Sōka Gakkai members published a book criticizing Kōmeitō's handling of security legislation, a symbolic event that exposed growing tension between party leadership and some supporters (Noguchi, Takigawa, and Kodaira 2016).

INSTITUTIONS OF ELECTORAL ALLIANCE

While it is undoubtedly true that the Sōka Gakkai members and Kōmeitō voters largely overlap, and that they are quite avid supporters of Kōmeitō, when it comes to cooperation with the LDP, the same level of enthusiasm is rarely observed. In fact, the institutionalization of the electoral alliance between the two parties has been characterized by risk-aversion. The Kōmeitō as well as the LDP have established such system so that they may maximize their benefits with the smallest cost possible; the electoral cooperation between the two parties, in other words, is characterized by unequal distribution of electoral resources. And the critical function of Kōmeitō's unequal resource distribution is systematized at the lower polity strata—namely at prefectural and district levels.

This section first discusses the Kōmeitō's 'candidate-based' evaluation system that operates as the key component of the party's instrument of risk-aversion, whose origin goes back to the period of organizational reconfiguration during the NFP initiative. Second, it sheds light on the recommendation system, a derivative of candidate-based evaluation system installed at the prefectural level, and how it operates as a buffer against over-supporting the LDP candidates in single-member districts. While the bargaining for resource allocation commences at the prefectural level through candidate-based evaluation system, the prefectural level negotiation determines not only whether to support the LDP candidates, but also how much support should be given—by 'timing' the execution of cooperation and scaling the degree of electoral support at the district level. Finally, it discusses the mechanism of 'candidate-based' electoral mobilization at district levels that allows Kōmeitō to deter risks in accommodating often-conflicting internal and external demands in the executions of electoral cooperation.

INTRODUCTION OF CANDIDATE-BASED EVALUATION SYSTEM

In cooperating with candidates from other parties, religious groups in Japan have traditionally engaged in candidate-based sponsorship, rather than expressing support for a single party (Klein and Reed 2014). When it comes to supporting candidates other than its own, Kōmeitō is no exception—even under the coalition framework. Kōmeitō has maintained its principle of 'candidate-based' cooperation with the LDP through the establishment of candidate evaluation system. Notwithstanding the inter-party agreement on electoral cooperation, Kōmeitō indeed carries out evaluation process vis-à-vis each LDP candidate before and during election period.

The origin of the candidate-based evaluation system dates back to the period of New Frontier Party (NFP) initiative (1994-1997), during which the Kōmeitō and Sōka Gakkai underwent internal crisis over the issue of the dissolution of the old Kōmeitō. While Kōmeitō leadership, particularly Ozawa Ichirō's political confidant Ichikawa Yūichi, was convinced that the complete merger of Kōmeitō organization to the NFP was possible before the 1995 upper house election in July, the reluctance of Sōka Gakkai and local Kōmeitō organizations eventually impeded the Ichikawa's plan for swift merger from coming about (Yakushiji 2016: 136-141). Instead, the party and Sōka Gakkai agreed to take up 'two-step merger' plan, which essentially divided Kōmeitō organization between national Diet members and local organizations/assembly members, while the latter was to retain its organizational autonomy

from the NFP.¹³ Such severing of Kōmeitō's national and local organizations reflected Sōka Gakkai's concern over the allocation of electoral resources. Prior to the official establishment of the NFP, Sōka Gakkai declared that it would keep certain distance from the new party (to be named later) after the dissolution of the Kōmeitō. On November 10, 1994, five days after the Kōmeitō adopted the dissolution motion at the National Party Convention, Sōka Gakkai announced *Basic View on Prospective Relationship with Politics* (*kongono seijini kansuru kihonteki kenkai*), in which the organization claimed that, while their one-party support for the local-level Kōmeitō (after the dissolution of the party) would remain unchanged, same merit would not apply to the new party:

- As the 55 system has come to an end, today's political situation in Japan is undergoing significant changes, calling for reforms in various dimensions. Kōmeitō's participation in the New-New Party can be credited as a constructive decision in response to this time of great change. Standing on such historic turning point, we, Sōka Gakkai, wish to clarify our basic principles in dealing with politics hereafter.
- From now onward, the criteria for candidate support will be evaluated on individual basis, after giving consideration to each candidate's political attitude, policy preferences, personal qualities and views, accomplishment, and his/her understanding of Gakkai ideology.
- Gakkai will carry out evaluation process before each election. The specific decision will be made based on careful evaluations by Central Committee (*chūōkaigi*) or each Society Council (*shakai kyōgikai*) within central, regional, or prefectural headquarters set up by the Central Committee.¹⁴

Simply put, Sōka Gakkai recanted their original position of 'one-party support' (*ittō shiji*), and declared to take on individual-based evaluation/recommendation system once the new party was launched. By introducing an evaluation system centering on *shakai kyōgikai*, or Society Council, on every polity level (central, regional, and prefectural), Sōka Gakkai essentially put forth that their support for each candidate will be decided based on the candidate's 'quality,' rather than his/her party affiliation.

Upon this shift in Sōka Gakkai's policy on electoral cooperation, Kōmeitō also followed suit. At the 77th Central Party Committee held on October 1, 1994, where the Kōmeitō announced the party agenda for the upcoming 1995 general local election, then the Kōmeitō's chairman of election committee Ōta Akihiro explained the new principles in electoral cooperation at local level:

- At this point, the Kōmeitō will not be obligated to engage in electoral cooperation just because the candidates are running as endorsed candidates from new party [i.e. NFP, in the next local election]. Until now, we have engaged in electoral cooperation with other parties based on three basic principles: (1) It should be carried out based on agreements made at local levels, not at the central level; (2) It should exhibit some level of give-and-take balance; (3) All agreements on electoral cooperation must be endorsed by the party's central executive committee.

He further added two criteria enforced by the Kōmeitō election committee: (4) The candidate

¹³ *Kōmei Shinbum*, 9 August 1994

¹⁴ *Kōmei Shinbum*, 11 November 1994

has profound understanding of the Kōmeitō's policies; and (5) the person is deemed worthy of the party's support in terms of his/her personality and insights.¹⁵ Such emphasis on 'personal quality' of candidates was meant to function as a deterrence apparatus against non-Kōmeitō NFP candidates in future elections, and to declare party's unchanging preference for Kōmeitō representatives over other NFP candidates, who would be 'competing' in the same district under the multi-member district system in the local election.

Along with the principle of 'candidate-based evaluation,' another critical principle of electoral cooperation for Kōmeitō/Sōka Gakkai organizations reinforced in 1994 was the criticality of local arrangement. Ōta's emphasis on 'agreement made at local levels' and consideration on 'give-and-take balance' implies that the details of electoral cooperation are left up to local arrangement, rather than to the inter-party negotiation at the central level. Such locally-administered mechanism of cooperation can be interpreted as the embodiment of the social group's defensiveness. Kōmeitō's high election rate under the multi-member district system, which usually marks nearly one hundred per cent in local elections, depends highly on the accuracy of vote allocations among the party's candidates, where the votes are evenly distributed to maximize the number of elected candidates under the multi-member district system.¹⁶ Locally-accumulated information on the demography of its supporters enables precise allocation of candidates and votes—a well-acknowledged feature of Kōmeitō/Sōka Gakkai organization.

Such framework for electoral cooperation characterized by candidate-based evaluation system and locally-arranged allocation of electoral resources became the key components for LDP-Kōmeitō electoral cooperation after 1999, facilitating the adaptability to the divergence of local contexts of the two-party relations. Essentially, the Kōmeitō substantiated these aspects of electoral cooperation by institutionalization of 'individual recommendation system,' whose operation is delegated to the party's prefectural headquarters.

PREFECTURAL-LEVEL NEGOTIATIONS: RECOMMENDATION SYSTEM

Upon the inauguration of the LDP-Kōmeitō alliance, the system of candidate-based evaluation was carried over to negotiate the allocation of electoral resources in the form of individual-based 'recommendation system.' Depending on whether the LDP candidate has received recommendation from the Kōmeitō, the degree to which Kōmeitō supporters in the district spend their resources in electoral campaign could largely differ. Once the LDP candidate in the district receives recommendation from the Kōmeitō, then the local Kōmeitō activists make explicit request to the Kōmeitō supporters to vote for the LDP candidate. Often, such pledges are made repetitively to individual supporters in order to consolidate the support for the endorsed LDP candidates.¹⁷ In other words, whether an LDP candidate is able to (or chooses to) receive recommendation from the Kōmeitō leadership could bear significant consequences to not only his/her vote shares but also to their campaign strategies.

Similarly, the Kōmeitō candidates also benefit from mutual recommendation system with

¹⁵ *Kōmei Shimbun*, 3 October 1994

¹⁶ Kōmeitō's election rates during general local elections were: 99.9 per cent (1995), 99.8 per cent (1999), 100 per cent (2003), 99.9 per cent (2007), and 99.9 per cent (2011) [Source: Election Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications].

¹⁷ Interview with a staff at Sōka Gakkai staff on 1 February 2017.

the LDP. The nomination from the LDP becomes a catalyst that beckon conservative voters to their side:

- The reason why the Kōmeitō ask for LDP's recommendation for their candidates is that, for example, they can make a poster with a picture of Prime Minister next to their candidates, or if they can claim that their candidate has the official recommendation from the LDP, it would be easier for them to appeal to the conservative voters that their candidate shares their political interests.¹⁸

In other words, the Kōmeitō candidates can enlarge the pool of supporters to non-Kōmeitō, conservative voters, by obtaining the official label in the name of 'recommended by the LDP.' But because of the small number of district candidates Kōmeitō runs during general elections, the Kōmeitō's cooperation to the LDP district candidates is compensated through other means as well, such as appealing to their own *kōenkai* members to vote for the Kōmeitō in PR; providing nomination to Kōmeitō candidates who are running in SMD in the same prefecture; agreeing on endorsement arrangement to concede a single-member district in the next general election (Costa Rican arrangement); promising to nominate a Kōmeitō candidate in the prospective UH elections, etc. In other words, the imbalance of the weight of vote allocation between the LDP and Kōmeitō is adjusted as the two parties negotiate the allocation of electoral resources in terms of both candidate endorsement and votes for national elections.

The institutionalization of 'candidate-based recommendation system' was mediated by two important organs established by Sōka Gakkai and the Kōmeitō. First, before the 1995 local election, *shakai kyōgikai*, or society council, was established within Sōka Gakkai as an organ to discuss the measures for national and local elections. Essentially, *shakai kyōgikai* today is set up to evaluate potential candidates—both Kōmeitō and LDP—in each polity level before elections. While *shakai kyōgikai*, held in prefectural, regional (*hōmen*) and central levels, is set up by the Sōka Gakkai prior to relevant elections, liaison meeting, or so-called *renraku kyōgikai*, is held regularly on every Thursday in order to facilitate 'communication' between Sōka Gakkai and the Kōmeitō. It is through this *renraku kyōgikai* Kōmeitō makes official request to Sōka Gakkai to support certain candidates, who would be deliberated in *shakai kyōgikai*. The final decision on whether to approve the recommendation of LDP candidates is delivered at *renraku kyōgikai*, where the Sōka Gakkai and the Kōmeitō discuss the quality of every LDP candidate who ask for the organizations' recommendation.¹⁹

Because of the vast number of LDP district candidates, however, primary evaluations of each candidate are carried out at Kōmeitō's prefectural headquarters. Individual LDP candidates file the request for recommendation to the respective LDP prefectural headquarters (*kenren*), which are delivered collectively to the Kōmeitō counterpart in each prefecture. Here, Kōmeitō's prefectural executive board (*kenkanjikai*) carries out deliberation of individual LDP candidates who run in the prefecture, and decides whether to recommend them to the party's central executive board (*chūōkanjikai*). Once the list is submitted by the prefectural executive board, the central executive board finalizes the decision and inform the LDP executive council at the central headquarter, and the decisions are also delivered at the party's prefectural level. Simply put, the inter-party negotiations on 'recommendation'

¹⁸ Interview with a Lower House LDP representative on 3 March 2017.

¹⁹ Interview with a Kōmeitō staff at Central Headquarter, 28 April 2017.

take place semi-collectively at the prefectural level.²⁰ For LDP candidates who do not receive recommendation from the Kōmeitō, Kōmeitō takes on the policy of *jishu tōhyō*, or autonomous voting, where the party does not support unitary candidate.

At the same time, as the coalition alliance sustained and cooperation deepened, it has become rarely the case where the Kōmeitō actually refuses to give party recommendation—at least on the surface. Once the Kōmeitō's prefectural headquarters decide to recommend LDP candidates, the party's central leadership rarely reject them; in most cases, some rejecting mechanism intervenes before the LDP candidates file the petition to the Kōmeitō's prefectural headquarter.²¹ Instead, the deterring mechanism functions in the way the Kōmeitō delays the prefectural-level 'deliberation' procedure until some conditions are met. For example, in the 2003 general election, Kōmeitō put off the issuances of recommendations to two LDP candidates who were running in Okinawa, until the LDP agreed not to field its own candidate in District Okinawa 1 and support Kōmeitō's Shiraho Taichi as joint candidate instead.²² In other words, the Kōmeitō is able to control the outflow of its electoral resources by controlling the timing of recommendation.

Aside from such downright negotiation of candidate coordination, there are other ways in which the Kōmeitō controls the allocation of its electoral resources—by implicitly timing the issuance of recommendation. Not all LDP candidates receive recommendations at the same time. Typically, the Kōmeitō carries out candidate evaluation processes across multiple occasions, and the distribution of recommendations takes place after each *renraku kyōgikai* between Kōmeitō and Sōka Gakkai held every Thursday. The below table shows the distributions of the number of recommendations given from the Kōmeitō to LDP candidates before the 2009 general election held on August 30 (Table 2). While the LDP issued recommendations to all eight Kōmeitō candidates on the day of the dissolution of the Lower House (July 21), the earliest issuance of recommendations from the Kōmeitō to the LDP candidates occurred on July 30, when the Kōmeitō announced the recommendations of ninety-two LDP candidates. Afterwards, Kōmeitō held weekly *renraku kyōgikai* at central level, where the party leadership discussed the issuance of recommendations to the remaining LDP candidates collectively.

The question, then, is why the timing of issuance of recommendations differs among candidates. One reason for the extended evaluation period has something to do with the diverse backgrounds of LDP candidates. One Kōmeitō staff explained:

Table 2. Date and Number of Recommendations before the 2009 General Election (Kōmeitō→LDP)

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	TOTAL
Date	July 30	Aug. 6	Aug. 13	Aug. 17	Aug. 20	Aug. 24	
#Recommendation	92	128	44	6	1	1	272

Source: Kōmei Shimbun

²⁰ Interview with a Kōmeitō staff at Central Headquarter, 13 December 2016.

²¹ One interviewee told me that, when the Kōmeitō supporters are clear about not wanting to support certain LDP candidate, then some brakes would be put on in order to prevent the candidate's name from being included in the list (Interview with a Kōmeitō headquarter staff on 28 April 2017).

²² *Kōmei Shimbun*, 18 August 2003.

Table 3. Kōmeitō's Vote Shares in Municipal Elections by Prefecture

1999				2003		
	Prefecture	Vote Share	Vote Counts	Prefecture	Vote Share	Vote Counts
1	Osaka	21.3%	562,065	Osaka	23.5%	560,432
2	Tokyo	18.0%	667,946	Tokyo	20.2%	708,286
3	Hyogo	15.1%	223,493	Hyogo	16.7%	247,471
4	Kanagawa	14.9%	407,243	Kanagawa	15.9%	455,102
5	Kyoto	13.8%	106,281	Saitama	15.3%	278,986

Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications

- There are several reasons why the timings of the issuance of recommendations differ. One is when the LDP candidates are first-time runners. In this case, we have no idea what kind of person this candidate is, so the process can take time. Another reason has a lot to do with local context. It is a problem of 'balance' in each district, and the LDP and Kōmeitō must discuss the possibility of cooperation or negotiate the give-and-take.²³

In other words, when and whether an LDP candidate can incorporate Kōmeitō supporters through recommendation system depends largely on both the 'quality' of the LDP candidate as well as the local weather of the two-party relations. The timings of the issuance of recommendations are the indicators that reveal the level of 'cooperation' between the two parties, especially at the local level, where inter-party negotiations, both official and unofficial, are carried out among local party leaders.

Furthermore, the scale of support mobilization varies across districts not only due to divergence of personal relations at the local level, but also because of the unique distributions of Kōmeitō's supporter demography characterized by high urban intensiveness. The source of Kōmeitō votes is concentrated in highly populated prefectures, which include government-designated cities (*seirei shitei toshi*). Table 3 shows the highest prefectural vote share of the Kōmeitō in municipal-level elections held during the general local elections in 1999 and 2003.²⁴ In these two elections, Kōmeitō's vote share is highest in Osaka, Tokyo, Hyogo, and Kanagawa, four of the highly populated prefectures where Kōmeitō fields its own candidates in district during Lower House elections.

Further, as Table 4 shows, the competitiveness of the Kōmeitō radically increases in government-designated cities as well as in Tokyo Special District assembly elections. Such competitiveness of the Kōmeitō vis-à-vis conservative parties particularly in urban cities was the fundamental reason why LDP was determined to win over cooperation from the Kōmeitō, who possesses significant number of loyal supporters in the very regions where LDP is most vulnerable. Put simply, in light of new electoral environment, the LDP's strategy to compensate its shortcoming was to rely on the highly 'urban' support base of the Kōmeitō

²³ Interview with a Kōmeitō headquarter staff on 28 April 2017.

²⁴ Municipal-level elections include: government-designated city assemblies, general city assemblies, Tokyo Special District assemblies, and town assemblies.

Table 4. LDP and Kōmeitō's Vote Gains (Share%) during General Local Elections in 2003

	LDP		Kōmeitō	
Prefectural assembly	14,463,993	38.9%	2,995,330	8.1%
Government-designated city assembly	1,970,821	21.0%	1,267,146	18.1%
Tokyo Special District	739,299	30.3%	496,369	20.3%

Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications

(Rosenbluth and Yamada 2015).

At the same time, it is critical to note that this urban-rural complementarity of two parties' support bases is often overstated. In reality, competitiveness of the Kōmeitō in urban regions and the power balance vis-à-vis the LDP in those districts can also become a source of tension. Because of the relatively high leverage Kōmeitō possesses in the urban districts, the party's demand toward its coalition partner can expand. As one LDP representative put it:

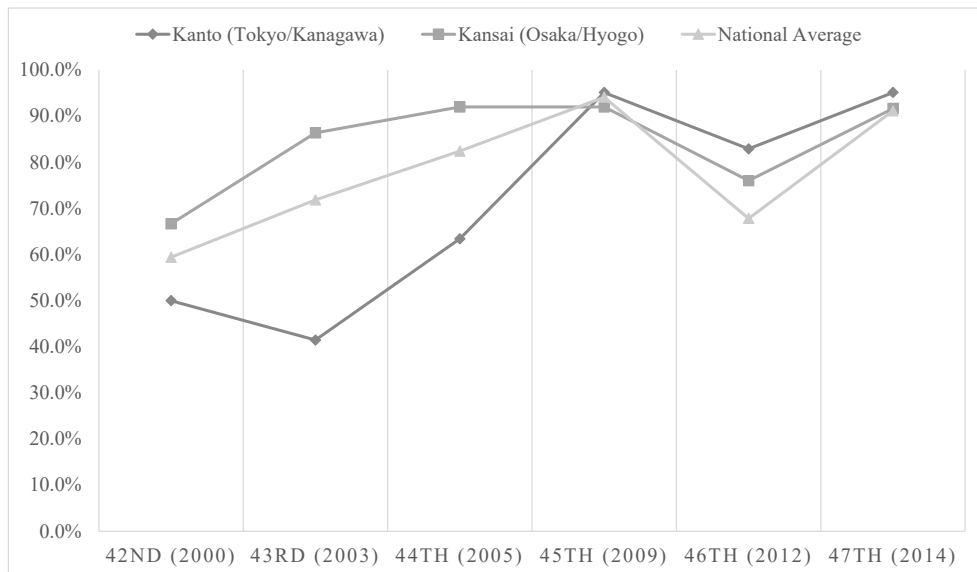
- In districts where LDP candidates are weak, in other words whose elections depend on the Kōmeitō votes, Kōmeitō tend to demand more from the LDP. ... Electoral cooperation can be difficult in regions such as Tokyo, Osaka, Kanagawa, and Hyogo, where Kōmeitō also runs its candidates in the districts during LH elections. In other words, in regions where LDP is strong, the cooperation with the Kōmeitō often goes smoothly, while in districts or prefectures where LDP is weak, difficulties can arise.²⁵

In fact, the recommendation rates from Kōmeitō to the LDP have shown contrasting patterns between two regions where Kōmeitō also runs district candidates during lower house elections. Figure 1 shows the recommendation rates from Kōmeitō to LDP candidates between Kanto and Kansai regions in the general elections from 2000 to 2014. While Kōmeitō possesses significant number of supporters in both regions, the levels of cooperation with the LDP was much higher in Kansai (Osaka and Hyogo districts) than in Kanto (Tokyo and Kanagawa districts), particularly in the early years of electoral alliance. In other words, the abundance of Kōmeitō's electoral resources does not necessarily lead to mature and effective cooperation.

Figure 1 Recommendation Rate (Kōmeitō → LDP) in General Elections (2000-2014) by Region

Put another way, despite the conventional understanding of Kōmeitō organization as monolithic and centralized, the ways in which the electoral cooperation takes place between the LDP and the Kōmeitō in each district can vary depending on the local balance of power, as well as the local inter-party relations (Cox 2003, Umawatari 2013, Ehrhardt 2014). It is such diversity of local personal/social relations and power balance between the two parties that provide incentives to the Kōmeitō to delegate decision-makings to the local actors, relieving the party's central leadership from the responsibilities of having to weigh the sensitive political balance. While the 'recommendation' itself has grown to become mere formality as the cooperation deepened and coalition alliance prolonged, this procedure that

²⁵ Interview with an LDP HoR representative on 6 March 2017.

Figure 1. Recommendation Rate (Kōmeitō → LDP) in General Elections (2000-2014) by Region

Source: Asahi Shimbun

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must go through prefectural headquarters at every election is significant in that the inter-party negotiations regarding electoral cooperation, from candidate endorsement to the issuing of recommendation, take place virtually at the prefectural level. Furthermore, such local-oriented decision-making process functions not only to incorporate local demands, but also as a defensive mechanism to avoid the risk of over-supporting the LDP counterpart by ‘evaluating’ every candidate, and deter those whose ‘quality’ are questionable by Kōmeitō’s standards.

CANDIDATE-BASED MOBILIZATION AT DISTRICT LEVEL

While the issuing of recommendations and controlling the timing of them can serve as an explicit signaling device for the Kōmeitō leadership to nudge its local organizations to mobilize support, the issuing of recommendation does not in itself commence full-fledged cooperation from the Kōmeitō supporters. Since the early stage, Kōmeitō and Sōka Gakkai have been known to implicitly control the degree to which the supporters participate in electoral cooperation with other political parties:

- In many occasions Gakkai takes on *jishu tōhyō* even when Kōmei gives *suisen* or support. Even when Gakkai takes on *jishu tōhyō* policy, its attitudes can differ election by election. In some cases, they would leave everything up to Kōmei; they would just let their supporters know about the fact that the Kōmei have given *suisen* or support; Kōmei politicians make appearance at Gakkai meeting and request support; or the Kōmeitō engages in active support by mobilizing resources even from outside their districts... (In other words) there are different

degrees of ‘support’ [from Sōka Gakkai].²⁶

Such ‘implicit’ compartmentalization of the electoral cooperation suggests that the electoral cooperation at the lowest polity strata is carried out based on candidate-centered logic, rather than within party-to-party cooperative framework initiated by central leadership. Put another way, the candidate-based evaluation system adopted at the prefectural level became the means to allow the incorporation of Kōmeitō’s electoral resources into ‘personal’ support base of each LDP candidate. One Sōka Gakkai member asserted that the principle of candidate-based mobilization was implemented in order to assuage hostility against the LDP, which was prevalent among the members of Sōka Gakkai in the beginning of coalition formation, and minimize the risk of over-supporting its candidates:

- I think, when it came to supporting LDP candidates, the principle of candidate-based support has been maintained because we used to be pretty hostile toward one another in the past. Moreover, we learned from the bitter experience of NFP and wanted to be careful by discerning the individual’s quality as a candidate.²⁷

The Kōmeitō’s emphasis on the ‘quality of the candidate’ implies that the incorporation of Kōmeitō support depends largely on the local relationship between individual LDP candidate and the respective Kōmeitō voters.

There are largely two aspects to the ‘candidate-based’ mobilization at the district level. First, the mechanism of candidate-based evaluation along with locally-delegated vote mobilization has functioned to allow rooms for individual Kōmeitō/Sōka Gakkai voters to make autonomous voting decisions, which essentially provides a buffer against policy/ideological incompatibilities. When I asked one Sōka Gakkai activist the reason for the absence of full-fledged cooperation in his district, he told me that some Sōka Gakkai members resent the candidate’s rightist remarks that are essentially incompatible to Kōmeitō’s ideological inclinations.²⁸ In other words, the Kōmeitō allows a degree of autonomy for its voters in making their voting decisions in order to maintain organizational integrity as a collective body of ‘free and democratic’ individuals.²⁹

Another function of ‘candidate-based mobilization’ is highlighted by the changes in the substance of so-called the ‘quality’ of the candidate (*kōhōsha no shitsu*) since Ota reinforced in 1995. Under the LDP-Kōmeitō framework, the ‘quality’ of the candidates, as well as the emphasis on one’s ‘understanding of Kōmeitō policies,’ became increasingly overshadowed by the criticality of local ‘give-and-take’ balance as well as district-to-district inter-party relations. Two cases in Tokyo and Osaka from the 2005 general election demonstrate how the levels of cooperation from the Kōmeitō to LDP supporters are determined not necessarily by policy consistency, but by locally-sensitive ‘personal relations.’

Upon prime minister Koizumi’s dissolution of the lower house, Koike Yuriko, who had joined the LDP in 2000 and had run exclusively in PR, announced her candidacy in Tokyo 10 as one of *shikaku* (i.e. ‘assassin’) candidates against three-time winner of the district

²⁶ (AERA 2000) Pp 154.

²⁷ Interview with a professor of Soka University, 17 January 2017.

²⁸ Interview with a Sōka Gakkai member, 17 January 2017.

²⁹ Interview with a professor of Soka University, 17 January 2017.

Table 5. Exit polls on voting decisions after 2005 general election

Supporting party	Tokyo 10 Koike Yuriko (LDP)	Tokyo 12 Ota Akihiro (Kōmeitō)
LDP	75%	59%
Kōmeitō	94%	93%
Nonpartisan	46%	28%

Source: Yomiuri Shimbun, 2005.09.12 pp. 7

Kobayashi Kōki, who voted against prime minister's postal reform bill. On the other hand, in Tokyo 12, known as the 'symbol' of LDP-Kōmeitō electoral cooperation in Tokyo, Kōmeitō's star politician Ota Akihiro raised his hand, after LDP's Yashiro Eita from the district also voted against Koizumi's signature legislation.³⁰ Yashiro recanted his withdrawal from the district after the LDP leadership refused to list him at the top of regional PR list and decided to run as independent. LDP leadership, afraid that Yashiro's candidacy would upset the Kōmeitō supporters and stagnate electoral cooperation in other districts in Tokyo, promised the party's fullest cooperation for Ota and even set up the unprecedented "special task force" to support the Kōmeitō candidate.³¹ For this, Tokyo Kōmeitō responded with highest level of cooperation to Koike Yuriko, claiming Tokyo District 10 as a 'symbolic district of LDP-Kōmeitō cooperation.'³² As the exit poll shows, the Kōmeitō voters displayed equally high coherence in supporting both Kōmeitō and LDP candidates (Table 5).

On the other hand, in District Osaka 2, Kōmeitō prioritized existing social relations over 'policy consistency.' A well-known *jiban* of Sato Akira who 'inherited' his father-in-law's kōenkai since the 2000 election, District Osaka 2 became another field for competition between postal rebel and a *shikaku* candidate. Unlike Kobayashi who had voiced crude criticism against NFP initiative during the 1996 general election, having run as an NFP candidate, Sato's relationship with the Kōmeitō remained amicable since the early stage. In 2005, Sato opposed Koizumi's postal reform, causing him to face *shikaku* candidate Kawajo Shika as an independent candidate. Unlike the case of District Tokyo 10, the Kōmeitō decided to take on autonomous voting, making Kawajo one of two LDP candidates in Osaka districts who ran without recommendation from the Kōmeitō. Even though she won against Sato by 2,500 votes, Kawajo was only able to mobilize 58% of combined support base of LDP and Kōmeitō, suggesting that the Kōmeitō voters seem to have been divided between Sato and Kawajo.³³

These cases from two prefectures illustrate how it was not the 'party label' or 'policy consistency' that mattered most in Kōmeitō's strategic choice; rather, it was a matter of 'local give-and-take' as much as existing personal relations. Even though Kōmeitō officially supported Koizumi's postal privatization, then the president of Kōmeitō Kanzaki Takenori

³⁰ Ota and Yashiro had an agreement to run alternatively under so-called Costa Rican agreement. In 2005, it was Yashiro's turn if he had not voted against postal reform.

³¹ Asahi Shimbun, 29 August 2005.

³² Asahi Shimbun, 27 August 2005.

³³ Kawajo's vote gain was 73,953, while the combined number of LDP and Kōmeitō's PR votes in Osaka 2 in 2005 was 127,413 (LDP 80,528; Kōmeitō 46,885).

implicitly suggested that the candidates' position on the policy does not matter as much as the "personal relationships that have been cultivated at the local level."³⁴ Some suggest that Kōmeitō measures the levels of personal relationship, or *tsukiai*, based on the degree of material contributions such as the candidate's kōenkai name list or how much votes s/he had mobilized for the Kōmeitō in the past.³⁵

More importantly, these two functions of candidate-based mobilization—autonomous decision-making and prioritization of local contexts over inter-party framework—operate as critical risk-aversion mechanism for the junior partner. By delegating decision-making power to local and individual spheres, Kōmeitō has come to possess the ability to flexibly incorporate both internal and external demands. At the same time, Kōmeitō's district-by-district flexibility parallels the LDP candidates' strategies for electoral mobilization as well. For the LDP candidates, their local Kōmeitō resources function as a kind of intermediary organization mobilized through the construction of personal accountability, rather than within inter-party framework, which continued to function as "an effective building block in mobilizing political support" (Park 1998, 236). Simply speaking, the incorporation of Kōmeitō votes into one's personal support base occurs as a part of the effort of constructing one's personal support organization, rather than as a simple embodiment of LDP-Kōmeitō coalition alliance at the central level, illuminating the 'inclusive' and 'flexible' nature of LDP's personal kōenkai organizations that operate within the social configuration of each electoral district.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The LDP-Kōmeitō alliance, a critical institution that has allowed the prolonged dominance of the LDP in the post-reform period, is often understood as the product of 'illicit handshake' between the two parties, which overlooks policy and ideological incompatibilities in order to stay in power. Yet such perspective ignores the dynamism of two-party cooperation, which becomes evident most vividly during the executions of electoral cooperation. As this study tried to illuminate, two parties successfully developed a system that allows flexible adjustment to divergent electoral environments across time and districts and devised internal mechanisms to deter risks in times of crises.

At the same time, while the fact that the inter-party negotiation regarding the recommendation takes place at the prefectural level is critical aspect of the inter-party negotiation, it does not diminish the 'centralized' control over the inter-party relations. In other words, it is the central leadership that accommodates overall checks-and-balances in terms of party's resource allocation. The reason why local leadership is given marginal autonomy in their decision-makings seems to lay in the central leadership's incentive to accommodate local demands, which often become critical in the effective implementation of electoral cooperation. In a way, such downward delegation of local-level negotiation procedure can be characterized as what Eldersveld called "reciprocal deference structure" (Eldersveld 1964, 9). He argues that distribution of power within a party, no matter how oligarchic it may seem, does not follow a simple hierarchical order, but instead it is characterized by partial delegation of power to the local leadership. The diversity of local

³⁴ Asahi Shimbun, 25 August 2005.

³⁵ Asahi Shimbun, 13 August 2005.

logics that generates divergent ways of executing electoral cooperation must not be confused with the lack of centralized coordination between the two parties' central leadership.

There are a few critical implications that can be drawn from the case of LDP-Kōmeitō alliance. First and foremost, the local adjustment mechanisms established between the two parties suggest that flexibilities, rather than the rigidity, of inter-party electoral alliance explain the sustainability of the two-party cooperation. Second, mechanism of LDP-Kōmeitō alliance embedded in local environments suggest the resilience of personal vote cultivation, which requires efforts among both LDP and Kōmeitō district candidates in constructing one's own electoral resources. While conventional studies have assumed somewhat disinterested and equal vote relocation mechanism operating between the two parties, in reality, Kōmeitō's organized votes are incorporated not unilaterally but on individual basis, degree of which must be measured within a local-specific context. To overlook such dynamism risks neglecting the necessity of reevaluating the nature of electoral competition after the electoral system reform in Japan.

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